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ABSTRACT

Noting that healthy adult-youth relationships are more critical today than in the past because of the complexity of the times and the diminished availability of parents and family networks of support, this paper focuses on those dimensions of the adult-youth relationship that foster healthy development and academic success in all youth, including those at risk. The importance of adult beliefs and expectations regarding the inner capabilities and health of each child and the importance of creating a climate of respect for the uniqueness of each individual are highlighted. Helping adults to listen, respect, and invite students' input and participation is also discussed as a key strategy for eliciting students' natural health and potential as is knowing and acting on the knowledge of this health and potential. The paper concludes with a summary of results of an intervention program aimed at high-risk middle school youth, their teachers, and their parents. The central feature of this intervention is a focus on quality adult-youth interactions and relationships in a transformed context, provided by the integration of the "Reciprocal Empowerment Model" of McCombs and Whisler and the "Health Realization Model" of Mills and his colleagues into an "empowerment philosophy." (Author/HTH)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on those dimensions of the adult-youth relationship that foster healthy development and academic success in all youth, including those at risk. This is shown to be even more critical in today's world than in the past because of the complexity of the times and the diminished availability of parents and family networks of support. The importance of adult beliefs and expectations regarding the inner capabilities and health of each child is highlighted as well as the importance of creating a climate of respect for the uniqueness of each individual. Helping adults listen, respect, and invite student input and participation are also discussed as key strategies for eliciting students' natural health and potential as is knowing and acting on the knowledge of this health and potential. The paper concludes with a summary of results to-date with an intervention program aimed at high-risk middle school youth, their teachers, and their parents. The central feature of this intervention is a focus on quality adult-youth interactions and relationships in a transformed context -- provided by the integration of the *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* of McCombs and Whisler and the *Health Realization Model* of Mills and his colleagues into an "empowerment philosophy."

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> Every student should have the opportunity to form an intense relationship with at least one adult. It is hard to describe the specific characteristics that would make up such a relationship because it varies with each individual. The characteristics which come to mind include: trust, non-threatening, challenging, intellectual equality, and caring. The adult in this relationship has often been described as a "significant other." She or he might be a teacher, secretary, janitor, or principal. While a "significant other" is hard to describe, most of us have had such a relationship with an adult while we were adolescents. If we think back to that relationship (or if we were lucky, relationships), it was often one of the most critical relationships of our lives.
>
> Karl Stauber, Needmor Fund
> Personal letter to author Joan Lipsitz (1984, pp. 181-182)

The spotlight is on American education. What must happen to ensure the success of all of our students -- the best and brightest as well as those considered to be at risk? Beyond being able to perform competitively on achievement tests in science and mathematics, what needs to happen so that our students are prepared to function effectively in the world of work? Will they be ready and able to meet the challenges of the 21st century? The pursuit of these and other related questions is resulting in the recognition that schools, originally designed for workers of an industrial age, must be restructured. What does this mean specifically for our teachers? What is their role in producing a citizenry poised for success, particularly in a world in which parental support and availability is diminished? While we believe that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are critical to effective teaching and learning, we believe further that the best curriculum, instructional techniques, and assessment procedures do not "work" in and of themselves but only when used by teachers who truly respect, care for, and believe in the

potential of their students. The perspective in this paper reflects the belief that the kinds of relationships and interactions between adults and youth that have always fostered healthy self-development and success are just as valid and even more critical in today's more complex world.

Consider the following, for example. When adults are asked to recall a teacher that impacted their lives and reflect upon the characteristics and qualities possessed by this teacher, the lists generated are virtually identical. They include descriptors such as caring, trusting, high expectations, respectful, belief in all students' potential, interest in students and their lives, challenging, sense of humor, high standards and expectations, good communication skills, fair, enthusiastic, set and communicated clear and fair limits, knowledgeable, compassionate, and so on. (It was interesting to find that Laminack [1985] conducted a survey of teacher education undergraduates asking them to identify the "qualities represented by your best teacher" which resulted in similar descriptors.) Or consider remarks such as those by a seventh grade student who said, "Somehow, in Mrs. Rinehammer's class, I wanted to behave myself. While the year before I had been a trouble maker, I made it to President of the Citizens' Club in her class" (cited in Purkey & Strahan, 1986, p. 1).

Similarly, when people who have "pulled themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps" and succeeded beyond what their backgrounds or circumstances would have predicted are asked what contributed most to their success, they most often say that there was someone in their lives, usually an adult, who believed in them; nurtured, supported, and encouraged them; didn't give up on them; facilitated the development of their potential; became an advocate for them; and served as a model and an inspiration.

Educator Gary Phillips believes that teachers have the power to promote academic and

social success with each and every child. He goes so far as to assert that those students labeled as gifted and talented are usually "fairly ordinary kids who have had the good fortune to have an extraordinary teacher...along with somebody within the home or community....Many of *us* are walking miracles, the testimonies of the power of education" (Phillips, 1988).

Thus there is empirical data for the power of certain kinds of adult relationships and interactions and the impact they can have on youth. What is proposed here is a transformed context within which to hold these relationships and interactions, one that provides for the natural empowerment of youth toward healthy self-development and academic success. Toward this end, this paper examines this role of adult-youth relationships -- from its developmental foundation to its current sociological imperative; presents dimensions of adult-youth relationships that foster healthy self-development and positive learning for students in general as well as for those most at risk; and, finally, focuses on quality adult-youth interactions and relationships in a transformed context -- provided by the integration of the *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* (McCombs, 1990; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; McCombs & Whisler, 1989; Whisler, 1991) and the *Health Realization Model* (Mills, 1991; Mills, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988; Suarez, Mills, & Stewart, 1987) into an "empowerment philosophy" -- in an intervention that has shown success with a group of parents, teachers, and high-risk students in a middle school in Aurora, Colorado.

The Basic Need for Positive Interactions and Relationships

Early researchers recognized the importance of social interaction, particularly as it relates to the development of the self in children. Cooley (1902) introduced the concept of the "looking glass self," believing it impossible to consider the self as existing in isolation. Mead (1934)

points out that the self develops as a result of social interactions and responses to the feedback of others. Similarly, Sullivan's theory of the function of feedback (1953) underscores the influential nature of feedback from others, particularly "significant others" (those with the most influence). Erikson (1968) and Ainsworth (1979) focus on the critical role of a warm and loving caretaker for healthy self-development as do Lewis and Brooks-Gunn (1979). Rosenberg's research (1979) highlights the critical role of parents and teachers, the most significant and influential relationships in the lives of children and adolescents. And Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of child development (1979) views the child's microsystem -- which includes parents and their parenting strategies, sibling and peer relations, and the nature of schooling experiences -- as the most significant sociocultural factor, the one with the greatest influence on the child's development.

More recently, Harter's research (1986, 1987, 1990) concludes that socioemotional support from significant others is essential for growth, change, and the development of healthy perceptions and beliefs. Ryan and Powelson (1991), Mills (1991), McCombs (1989, 1990, 1991), and Whisler (1991), all posit that the motivation to learn, seen by all to be intrinsic, is mediated, facilitated, or elicited by positive social interactions and relationships.

Parents Role Diminishing

Many argue that there is a more pressing need today for positive adult-youth relationships than at any other time in history. Prior to the end of World War II, the nation was largely rural and/or small town in nature. Children were raised within family and extended family networks that included on-the-job training for life and within which children experienced a sense of belonging, felt cared about, and perceived themselves as contributors (Glenn & Nelsen, 1988).

Access to the "outside world" was more limited and less immediate than it is today, and authority figures knew one another and agreed upon and extolled common values, which were related to as "truths" by most children. The school was often a part of the primary social network and the community facilitated the mission of the school (Comer, 1984).

With the end of World War II came a massive move to more urban settings resulting in the loss of large family networks of support and meaningful life experiences for learning life roles. Both families and teachers traveled greater distances to get to schools and were, therefore, usually unknown to one another and had different backgrounds. At the same time, television brought children face-to-face with many different value systems, alternative life styles, and immediate information about the increasingly changing world in which they lived. To make matters worse, at the very time that these and similar circumstances were producing confusion and stress and a greater need for nurturance and support, the nature of the home was changing such that children had less support than ever.

After the war, too, women began to enter the workforce in great numbers. While in 1955, 60 percent of households consisted of a father working outside the home and a mother working inside the home, by the end of hte 1980s fewer than 10 percent of the households fit this picture. By 1988, approximately 61 percent of mothers of children under age six worked outside the home.

Another disruption to the family and home was divorce. Divorce became more acceptable and common and brought with it other problems. The risk of poverty, for example, is greater among divorced women with mothers' income often dropping by 30 percent. Availability to and support for children is also more problematic for divorced parents; as many

as 40 percent of noncustodial parents never see their children and, of those that do, fewer than 50 percent see them on a average of once a week (O'Neil, 1991).

One of the results of urban-suburban, dual-career, and/or single-parent homes, then, is more isolation of the children of these families. Nearly 20 percent of 6th-12th graders surveyed, for example, said that they had not had a 10-minute conversation with either of their parents during the preceding month. And at least 2 million 5-13 year old students are "latchkey kids," putting them at greater risk for smoking, drinking, and taking drugs (O'Neil, 1991). Sociologist James Coleman claims that in a growing number of families "the resources of the adults are not available to aid the psychological health and the social and educational development of children" (cited in O'Neil, 1991).

Teachers' Role Increasingly Critical

Because of the loss of significant parental availability and because of the very nature of learning in today's classrooms -- Ryan and Powelson (1991) point out that learning today is almost completely decontextualized; whereas in the past learning was embedded in the activities that comprised daily living, today's students are expected to learn skills in an environment devoid of life context and meaning. For these and the foregoing reasons, teachers have an increasingly significant role to play in students' successful self-development and learning. Their interactions and the relationships they create with their students are vital to helping students grow and learn. As Lounsbury (1991) says:

> Students' perceptions of personal interactions with teachers apparently play a major role in determining their attitudes toward school. Students' self-esteem and feelings of well-being are correlated closely with the level of interaction with teachers and greatly affect both attitude and interest. Attitude and interest, we know, ultimately, relate to achievement -- as much or more than intellectual capacity *per se* (p. 21).

There is general agreement about the qualities and characteristics of effective teachers, attributes that promote healthy self-development and academic success. The Carnegie Council (1989), for example, while specifically addressing the needs of young adolescents, talks about the kind of teacher-student relationships that all children benefit from:

> Caring is crucial to the development of young adolescents into healthy adults. Young adolescents need to see themselves as valued members of a group that offers mutual support and trusting relationships. They need to be able to succeed at something, and to be praised and rewarded for that success...(p. 33)

The Council also points out that students need at least one thoughtful and caring adult who has the time and takes the trouble to talk with them about academic matters, personal problems, and things that interest them. They conclude that stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental for intellectual development and personal growth.

The invitational learning model (Purkey & Novak, 1988; Purkey and Strahan, 1986) consists of four assumptions about the nature of people. When these assumptions are "adopted" and teachers operate from *trust* (teachers encourage students to be responsible and to make choices and avoid responding in kind to hostile and aggressive behavior); *respect* (teachers value the uniqueness, ability, importance, and self-directing power of students and respect is given whether or not "earned"); *intentionality* (teachers are intentional in their actions, do things "on purpose," and maintain their intentionality in the face of apparent failure), and *optimism* (teachers are positive and maintain their belief in the potential of all students, knowing they will learn in a cooperative and supportive setting) -- they relate and interact in ways that foster positive development and academic achievement. The assumptions hold that people are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly; education should be a collaborative, cooperative activity; people possess untapped potential in all areas of human

endeavor; and, human potential can best be realized by places, policies, and processes that are specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally.

Furthermore, Carkhuff (1982) reports that teachers with high levels of affective-interpersonal skills are more effective in teaching learners a variety of cognitive skills and Aspy and Roebuck (1972) find that levels of teachers' interpersonal functioning are directly related to both achievement and self-development. Combs (1982) notes that it's difficult for students to dislike or not work for a teacher who believes in their uniqueness, capacity, and worth. Students tend to live up to the expectations of their teachers and show greater interest, involvement, commitment, effort, and achievement in such teachers' classrooms. The teacher's job, then, is to create a climate within which children can do what they are meant to do: move and grow toward health. Thus, effective teachers encourage, facilitate, and assist their students as they learn and grow. They also are aware of and sensitive to their students' points of view; that is, they are empathetic.

Other authors specify similar attributes of effective teachers. Sale (1979), for example, citing Hamachek's research, describes five perspectives that differentiate good from poor teachers. These teachers: (a) have more positive perceptions of others; (b) see others as potential friends rather than as critically attacking people with ulterior motives; (c) tennd to use more democratic classroom procedures; (d) are able to see things from others' points of view; and, (e) see students as self-dependent individuals to be valued and respected rather than people "you do things to."

Rouche and Baker's (1986) list of qualities of exemplary teachers parallels what has been

said above. Effective teachers, they assert, have a strong commitment to their work and to their students; view their student as "whole individuals" working in a context broader than the classroom; are active listeners; are sensitive to the mood of a class or an individual; build rapport by showing students respect, treating them fairly, and trusting them; show empathy; have high expectations; and are warm and caring.

Glenn and Nelsen (1988), too, are consistent in the attributes they find to contribute to a climate of support for both healthy self-development and academic success, including an openness to exploring the student's point of view; listening with the purpose of understanding the student's point of view; empathy, resulting from careful listening; genuineness, conveyed through warmth and interest; an ownership of personal feelings; and respect for differing points of view.

The qualities and characteristics that are important in relationships between teachers and students in the general population are even more important in relationships between teachers and students most at risk of failing and/or dropping out of school. Gold and Petrino (1980), for example, report on programs that successfully work with delinquent youth. These are characterized by teachers who have an interest in and sympathy for adolescents who get in trouble, are friendly and informal in their interactions, show faith in their ability to act responsibly and to succeed academically, and provide understanding and emotional support.

Mills et al. (1988), in their work with high-risk youth, show that positive interactions and relationships facilitate these youth's ability to function in healthy, successful ways. Effective teachers are more caring and supportive, empathetic, unafraid, upbeat, unstressed, treated youth with genuine regard and respect, and believe in the inherent potential and "goodness" of their

students.

Also addressing at-risk students, Peck, Law, and Mills (1989) find that successful dropout programs are less a function of the structure of the program and more a matter of the qualitative dimensions, specifically a positive teacher culture, one in which students perceive the staff as genuinely caring and having their best interest at heart. Teachers are supportive; respectful; non-judgmental; and understanding of the role that a supportive, secure family atmosphere plays in facilitating learning and positive self-development.

Finally, Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989), identify four teacher beliefs and/or values, with corresponding behaviors, that facilitate the healthy development and academic success of at-risk students. These include teachers accepting personal *accountability* for student success -- accepting responsibility for helping students overcome impediments to academic, personal, and social success; believing in practicing an *extended teacher role* -- going beyond the standard required set of teacher activities; accepting the need to be *persistent* with students who are not ideal pupils -- relating to misbehavior and poor performance neither as a defect nor a deficiency and responding with understanding rather than retribution; and *expressing a sense of optimism* that all students can learn if they build upon students' strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses. The authors also point to the necessity of teachers taking into account the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which their students live.

In summary, a common thread throughout the above research that relates to at-risk youth is the importance of not "feeding," or actually interrupting, the cycle of failure of these young people by not "hooking into" or reacting in kind to their negative behaviors and poor performance. Instead, effective adults relate to such behaviors and performances as "expressions

of accumulated frustrations and disadvantaged backgrounds (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 137) or as "packages of insecure perceptions, feelings, and behaviors that we call deviance" (Mills, et al., p. 651) that get triggered when youth feel threatened and afraid. A correlate to this is the deeply held belief or "knowing" by such adults that these youth have the same potential as other children and, given the right environment and supportive relationships, can and will develop in a healthy manner and learn as well.

Supportive Adult-Youth Relationships

The nature of teacher-student relationships that facilitate healthy self-development and academic success can be generalized, with the exception of those exclusively having to do with the classroom setting, to adult-youth relationships in general. In addition to caring, respecting, trusting, being optimistic, understanding, encouraging, being positive, empathizing, having high expectations, communicating well, and being interested in youth, Glenn and Nelsen (1988) specifically call for *all* adults to interact and relate to youth in such a way that the following perceptions and skills, found to be weak in at-risk youth and strong in low-risk and successful young people, are developed and strengthened:

1. Perceptions of personal capabilities. "I am capable."

2. Perceptions of significance in primary relationships. "I contribute in meaningful ways and I am genuinely needed."

3. Perceptions of personal power or influence over life. "I can influence what happens to me."

4. Intrapersonal skills. The ability to understand personal emotions, use that understanding to develop self-discipline and self-control, and learn from experience.

5. Interpersonal skills. The ability to work with others and develop friendships through communication, cooperation, negotiation, sharing, empathizing, and

listening.

6. Systemic skills. The ability to respond to the limits and consequences of everyday life with responsibility, adaptability, flexibility, and integrity.

7. Judgmental skills. The ability to use wisdom and evaluate situations according to appropriate values (pp. 49-50).

Students who are strong in these perceptions and skills are developmentally and educationally "sound."

Glenn and Nelsen (1988) outline some specific adult behaviors -- "barriers" and "builders" -- that result in interactions and relationships that either undermine or promote the development of the perceptions and skills in youth. These behaviors include *assuming* -- operating as if what was so for or about an other in the past is what is so in the present (the barrier) vs. *checking* -- allowing for growth and change by the other (the builder); *rescuing* or *explaining*, -- stepping in to help or take responsibility for another vs. *exploring* -- allowing the other to master the situation; *directing* -- telling another how to do something or to do it our way vs. *encouraging* or *inviting* -- having the other to learn for him or herself; *expecting* -- requiring another to meet unrealistic and often unstated standards and focusing on the failure to meet them vs. *celebrating* -- recognizing another's progress and accomplishments; and *adultisms* -- requiring another to read our mind and think as we do vs. *respect* -- giving credence to another's experience and understanding.

In summary, Comer (1984) captures the essence of the discussion of the importance of nurturing and supportive adult-youth relationships:

> ...a child has the best chance to learn and achieve optimally when he or she experiences adequate child rearing, is enmeshed in a supportive home and social network that facilitates development, when the school enhances such development, and when the societal message is one of belonging, worth, and value (pp. 128-129).

A Transformed Context for Adult-Youth Relationships

As is evidenced above, there is no shortage of agreement on potential impact that positive adult-youth relationships can have on the healthy self-development and academic success of young people. In our work at the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory we have been working to integrate these research findings with a model we are developing that separates psychological and intellectual functioning (*Reciprocal Empowerment Model* described by McCombs, 1990, 1991; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; McCombs & Whisler, 1989; Whisler, 1991) and a "wellness" or mental health model (the H*ealth Realization Model* of Mills, 1991). We believe that this integration results in a transformed context within which quality adult-youth interactions and relationships naturally empower the healthy self-development and academic success of young people.

Will, Skill and Social Support

The *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* (McCombs, 1990; Whisler, 1991; McCombs & Whisler, 1989), which has been reconceptualized by my colleague Barbara McCombs and I, provides a framework for understanding the nature of relationships and interactions that best facilitate the empowerment of healthy self-development and academic success in young people. This model delineates three basic components. **Will** is defined an innate state of self-potential that includes motivation, agency, and volition and leads to metacognitive awareness and understanding as described in the health realization model below. **Skill** includes learned cognitive or metacognitive competencies that develop with training and/or practice. **Social support** is the interpersonal component; it is the quality interactions and relationships that facilitate the elicitation of will and the development of skill. The will, skill, and social support

components of the model are shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

As depicted, the **will component** includes *inherent self-potential* (recognition of one's natural capacity for self-esteem, motivation, love of learning, common sense, and inner wisdom); *self as agent* (understanding the nature of self as a psychological vantage point that includes authentic agency, autonomy, and self determination); and *authentic self* (operation with volition, intention, and commitment from an enhanced understanding of the true self). The **skill component** includes *self-control* (the development of strategies for self-regulation of cognition, affect, motivation, and behavior); *metacognition* (the development of competencies for reflective self-awareness and the evaluation of thinking and agency that shift level of consciousness); and *other facilitation* (the development of perspective taking, conflict resolution, communication, and interpersonal skills). The **social support component** includes *relatedness* (creating a climate/culture of trust, respect, caring, concern, and community with others); *autonomy support* (providing opportunities for choice, self-determination, agency, and the freedom to fail); and *competence support* (providing information feedback, challenge, and opportunities to grow and to observe growth over time). The elements of these components combine with the perspective of the health realization model to provide a transformed context for adult-youth relationships that naturally empower healthy self-development and learning, as described below.

Health Realization Model

The *Health Realization Model* of Mills and his colleagues (Mills, 1991; Suarez et al., 1987) is unique in its focus on an already existent core of mental health that resides within people and that, in fact, is there from birth. While several humanistic models posit a "self-actualized state," this state is usually seen as having to be developed, "supplied," or attained. The health realization model holds that it exists in all human beings and, while it may be obscured or "covered over," it is always available to be elicited or accessed. The model posits three principles. The *principle of mind* states that all human beings are born with and have access to a core of mental health -- that is, a state of mind or higher level of functioning characterized by a sense of unconditional self-esteem and well-being; natural motivation, love of learning, and desire to master the environment; common sense and the ability to make wise judgments; natural access to creativity and insight; the capacity to function in an unselfconscious manner and with empathy for others; and an inner wisdom, a direct understanding or knowing of what "is" as well as of appropriate actions for situations. This core of mental health, which is directly available to all, allows us to function outside of our learned or conditioned belief systems.

The second principle is the *principle of thought*. Through learning and life experiences, we develop thought systems, beliefs, frames of reference through which we experience and interpret external reality. These conditioned, self-conscious, habitual thought systems result in insecurities and negativities that obscure our core of mental health. Thinking negative thoughts results in negative feelings, behaviors, and results/reactions, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies. When we are unaware of how our thoughts operate, we function as if they are "the truth," fail

to see the validity of others' "separate realities," and take personally their negative actions. The power of this model is that once we understand the model and, particularly, the role of thought and how it covers up our core of mental health, we are able to function outside of our insecure and often self-limiting frame of reference and access our core of mental health. From this state we experience being the thinker of our thoughts and understand them for what they are.

The third principle is the *principle of consciousness.* Consciousness is awareness. It is the understanding and experience of how thought, consciousness, and mind work together. It is also a measure of the degree to which we relate to our thoughts as real. When in higher levels of consciousness, we have access to our core of mental health and a more objective perspective rather than one clouded by our conditioned point of view. We also have spontaneous insights and realizations when operating from higher levels of consciousness. From higher levels of consciousness we are able to experience reality more objectively, to see what is so without our conditioned point of view and thinking tarnishing the "view." When in lower levels, on the other hand, we are more troubled and often negative, caught unawaredly in the contents our of insecure, conditioned thought systems, unable to see beyond our own separate reality, to see what is so. Another hallmark of this model is the role of affect. Feelings and moods are seen as both indicators and facilitators of levels of consciousness. That is, when we are in a positive mood and experiencing positive feelings, our core of mental health is accessible, we are in a higher level of consciousness. Likewise, if we are stuck in our insecure thought systems, getting ourselves into a better mood or feeling better will move us from a lower to a higher level of consciousness and give us access to our core of mental health.

An Integration of the Models

Where do the models come together and create a transformed context? As was concluded above, quality relationships have the potential to impact youth, specifically the degree to which they exhibit healthy self-development and academic success. The integration of the models allows us to make a powerful assertion: Quality interactions and relationships have power because they facilitate and engage the core of mental health. That is, when adults recognize the inherent potential and nature of themselves and their students and function from this higher level of understanding -- from their own core of mental health (will, health realization), they are empowered to interact and relate in positive ways, with trust, respect, caring, and concern, providing a positive learning climate (social support). They thus facilitate the engagement of youth's core of mental health (skill, health realization). The youth, in turn, access their innate healthy self as well as their inherent love of learning and motivation (will, health realization). These adults then, functioning from their own core of mental health, access their common sense and inner wisdom which results in their naturally responding appropriately to their students' needs (health realization) and employing the skills needed to assist the students to develop the competencies they need to succeed academically (skill).

An Intervention Program

The "Neighbors Making a Difference" project at McREL is aimed at reaching adults and youth in the neighborhood of a middle school in Northwest Aurora, an area troubled by a high concentration of drug use and trafficking and gang activity. The intervention features an "empowerment philosophy" which stems from the integration of the *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* and the *Health Realization Model*. The primary message emanating from the philosophy

is that (a) there is a core of mental health within every individual, and (b) this core can be elicited through quality caring and supportive interactions and relationships between adults and youth. A critical aspect of the project is the intention to reach adults in the neighborhood that interface with youth and to share the philosophy with them such that their interactions and relationships with these youth empower the young people to make healthy life choices and to succeed in school (McCombs, Whisler, Handler, & Keller, 1991).

The targeted middle school consists of just over 500 students, all of whom are characterized by school staff as being disadvantaged and at risk in some way. Approximately 64% of the students qualify for a federally subsidized free or reduced breakfast/lunch program. The transient rate is more than 44% and 51% of the students are from minority groups (Black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian). While there is not a great drug and alcohol problem in the school, 30-40% of students know someone with an alcohol or drug problem and nearly 30% of the students have been involved with the law for offenses ranging from drug abuse and gang involvement to thefts and assaults. The neighborhood surrounding the school comprises a mix of low and middle class residents, varied ethnicities, and young families as well as retired persons (many of whom were previously associated with the military). While there is some underlying racial tension within the neighborhood and a lack a any cohesive sense of community, there are several concerned groups working to address some of the local problems as well as generate some pride about living in this somewhat historic neighborhood.

Empowerment Training

One of the goals of the project is, through an "empowerment training component," to present workshops for teachers, parents, and community members in which they learn about and

internalize the empowerment philosophy and its application, so as to use it in their personal lives and in their interactions and relationships, particularly with those students who attend the middle school that is the focus of the intervention. In addition, student groups have been established to introduce the empowerment philosophy to some middle school students identified by their teachers as being at risk of failing or dropping out of school.

Three community workshops were held during the summers of 1990 and 1991. These included parents, teachers, administrators, business people, church representatives, city government employees, service club members, and community agency personnel. In addition to fostering collaboration among various groups, the primary focus of the workshops was to impart the empowerment philosophy such that adult-youth relationships were encouraged and positively affected. The workshops included didactic material, particularly that focused on the empowerment philosophy, individual and group application exercises, small group activities, large group discussions, videotape presentations, and panel presentations. Approximately 65 community members attended the three workshops.

The original intent was to conduct at least two teacher training inservice series for the teachers at the middle school; one such series was held during the fall of 1990, in four after-school sessions, and was attended by approximately 26 teachers from the middle school and a local feeder elementary school. We folded further teacher training into the community workshops at the suggestion of teachers who believed that a heterogeneous group experience would be more meaningful. The teacher training was organized around the principles of the empowerment philosophy and their application to the teachers' personal lives as well as to classroom situations, particularly their interactions and relationships with students. The training

included didactic material delivered through lecture and videotape presentation, individual and group application exercises, small group activities, small and large group discussions, and small group presentations. Specifically, the principles were discussed in relation to such common teacher issues and concerns as substance abuse prevention, high-risk youth, optimal learning environments, classroom management and discipline, special needs students, and teacher stress.

To reach parents, we designed parenting sessions. We found that it was difficult to get parent participation in the community workshops (getting time off work was difficult and impractical) and believed that evening and Saturday afternoon sessions would be more amenable to parent schedules and responsibilities. Evening sessions were held in a local community development office; Saturday sessions were held in a neighborhood church. The sessions focused on the empowerment philosophy and its principles and their application to parent and parent-child issues. These classes were much less formal in nature than the community workshops or teacher training sessions. Parents shared what was in the forefront of their concerns and interactions and networking among group members was facilitated. The empowerment principles were applied where appropriate and parents shared about ways in which they applied the principles during the previous week.

Early in 1991, because fewer parents were being reached than anticipated, we decided to attempt to reach students directly. As a result, two groups, one sixth grade and one seventh grade, were formed. Students were recommended by their teachers because, while they were currently failing or doing poorly, they were believed 1) to have potential, and 2) to be likely respond to having an adult express interest in them and be available to support them. Ten students (five sixth graders and five seventh graders, in each of two groups) met with the author,

on a weekly basis, for approximately three months. The purpose of the groups was to have a time and place when these students could experience positive interactions and relationships with an adult who cared about and supported them, and to provide a small group of peers with whom they could relate and become close. Students engaged in projects and activities that were both fun and that promoted healthy self development and growth. Some of the empowerment principles were also introduced, in an informal and non-academic way, as appropriate. Because of the informal nature of the group setting, and its focus and hands-on activities and projects, the principles were not seen by the leader to have been integrated by the students by the time the group sessions ended. The group setting also provided an opportunity for students to make academic commitments, which they did freely. For example, students promised to turn in homework, to behave in class, and/or even to attend classes.

Results with Students

The academic records of the ten students who participated in the high risk student groups were obtained and reviewed. Grades for language arts, mathematics, reading, science, and social studies were compared for the quarterly reporting periods preceding and during their involvement in the groups. The pattern of grades in these subjects for each quarter were analyzed with respect to trends for each student (grades improved, unchanged, or declined at the end of the final quarter). Six of the ten students showed a decline in overall grades, one was unchanged, and three showed improved grades. Thus, there was limited evidence of improved school grades as a result of students' short-term participation in group sessions. Students were asked whether their involvement with the groups had any impact on their attitude toward school. All ten students reported that they enjoyed school more as a result of the group sessions and that

they attended more regularly. Although individual attendance data were unavailable to verify this latter claim, informal discussions with teachers indicated that, for all but two students, attendance increased. Students also reported that they learned to relate to peers and adults in a more functional, responsible manner from their group involvement, a finding also verified by discussions with teachers.

The full impact of the student groups can be more directly assessed by a qualitative analysis of changes at the individual student level. Furthermore, given that the student intervention occurred over a brief time span (three months) and for only eleven sessions, it was anticipated that results would show up in the form of attitude changes about self and others; a more positive attitude toward school; better work habits; and more appropriate school and classroom behavior. These would result in better self-esteem as well as lead to more healthy self-development and choices. It was expected that academic achievement might increase but it was not expected in such a short time frame.

It can be reported that the ten student group members all expressed a genuine enthusiasm for the group experience. Several of their teachers reported that these students looked forward to attending the group sessions and one shared that her student (J. H.) stated that "Jo Sue really listens to us and cares about us." This student, by the way, is one of three who did improve his grades by the end of the semester in which he participated in the group. Several of his teachers also noted that he had a more positive attitude in class, was more quickly calmed down when he did get involved in troublesome situations, and was much better about doing both classroom assignments and homework. Two other six grade students (J. S. and C. K.) also improved academically (thus three of the five sixth graders actually showed an overall rise in

grades) as well as in their attitudes, behavior, and work habits. C. K., in fact, had all A's on his final report card (up from C's and D's at the beginning of the school year). His attitude turned around completely and in the words of one of his teachers, "He dropped his negativity, considered the things we did as important, and did a real turn around." J. S., in addition to bringing up her grades, was reported by her teachers to have a much more positive attitude and to be less disruptive in class.

A fourth sixth grader, A.M., did not do better academically and was not even reported to have changed much in his attitude during classes. During the group, however, he did change. He went from being completely introverted and alone (he and his teachers described him as "not belonging") to opening up to and feeling a part of the group. During one session he shared how he couldn't get a particular teacher (Mr. G.) to listen to and understand him and how much trouble he got into in that class no matter what he did or did not do. He almost burst into tears crying, "I'm just dumb. I can't do it. No matter what I do it's always wrong." The group members listened intently and responded compassionately with hugs. They then coached him about how to better handle the situation. It appeared that this student had more of a sense of self esteem by the end of the semester and had a sense of belonging with a group of peers. He also demonstrated a grasp of the empowerment philosophy when he exclaimed, "Gosh, poor Mr. G. (the teacher he had so much trouble with and professed hating). I can see, standing in his shoes, that he must be very frustrated and sad. He's just trying to do his job and teach us. And we make it pretty hard for him. Gosh. I never realized this. I'm going to remember this when I'm in his class." And he did complain less about this teacher and class after having this insight.

The last sixth grader (also a very introverted and withdrawn child), again while not

improving academically, appeared to feel more comfortable with his peers by the end of the semester and seemed happier as well (he moved from total non participation and always appearing sad to participating, smiling and even telling jokes during group time.) The facilitator discerned that this student was experiencing stress in the family when he asked questions such as, "Can a stepfather take you away from your real father? I think my stepfather is going to take me away." Upon checking with teachers it was found that he seemed worried and preoccupied much of the time. While he did not improve in his work, he did talk about wanting to do better in school.

The sixth grade group was more cohesive than the seventh grade group. Two of the five seventh grade students were absent from school and the group more than they were present. One girl, J.L., had been suspended and entered the group a month after the others had started and was ill much of the semester. A second, S.V., was also absent a lot. She appeared to be apathetic and just didn't come to school (her attendance did, however, improve over the course of the group). At the end of the group she confided that her parents had been in the process of separating and that she had been very upset and thus had stayed home to be with her mother. A third student, J.L., while more present than the previously mentioned seventh graders, also missed several groups. It was later discovered that he had been "kicked out" of his mother's home and not wanted by his father. He became an unwanted "football," being passed back and forth between homes for several weeks. The other two boys, R. G. and A.J., struggled through the group. A.J. never participated fully and did not improve in school. R.G. only raised one grade but his attitude about school did improve.

It is believed that the inconsistent attendance of the majority of the group members

prohibited the group from "jelling" as did the sixth grade group and, therefore, the intervention did not have as great an impact as it did with the sixth graders. Sixth graders, being in their first year in middle school, are also less set in the "middle school ways and behaviors" and are more able to be impacted.

Rssults with Adults

Overall, the reactions of participants to the empowerment workshop were positive. The perceived impacts were varied. Many reported being more relaxed or at-ease in dealing with others including youth. Others reported an enhanced awareness of "separate realities," a better understanding of others, and an easier time dealing with "difficult" children or others in their lives. Since the intervention was designed to indirectly influence the students of the middle school, respondents were asked if they saw any impacts of their training on children. The changes were perceived to be relatively subtle and long term but many expected that more positive impacts would be realized in the future. Some noted that as they better understood and accepted each child's inherent worth and point of view, their children seemed to be encouraged, made more responsible choices, and dealt more effectively with their problems. Respondents generally reported that they applied the principles they learned in their relationships with children and coworkers and expected the sense of wellness and the positive approach to personal interactions to have a lasting influence.

Several adults became the subjects of case studies, looking at the effect of applying the empowerment philosophy. One teacher wrote that "the greatest benefit was receiving additional insight into the thinking process of students at risk." Another noted, "I find this an extremely useful tool when dealing with low income parents . . . It helps me be empathetic, less defensive

or judgmental, and in a way I initially found surprising, very respectful of the other person." One of the parents recognized the value of the thought cycle (a specific concept in the philosophy) for dealing with his children - "I try to take extra time to listen to what the boys are saying and give it some thought before spitting out a negative response."

One of the teachers made a special effort to apply the concepts to his relationship with three at risk students. All three were receiving failing grades and were often absent from school. By taking "the time to establish a less judgmental relationship . . ., taking more interest in her personally, and in developing a good relationship based on the principles of the training" one of the students "took much more interest in school and ended up on the honor roll - a complete and total turn around." While the teacher reported somewhat less success with the other two students, he attributed that to a lack of time with the students. He observed, "The students that have the best chance of success are the students that are in a stable environment for some period of time." He went on to suggest that, because of the high turnover among students at the middle school, it might be best to involve students directly in the empowerment training rather than relying on teacher training to influence students. "What we need is to somehow compress the concepts into something that is more modular in nature. That can get a student started, . . . can set them up for success if they go other places."

The project evaluation was designed to examine, among other things, the impact of the intervention on the adult-youth interactions and relationships such that these, through training in the empowerment philosophy, became more positive and effected healthy self-development and academic success with youth. The principle findings in these areas indicate that (1) the impact of the high risk student group intervention was mixed. While the academic performance

of involved students declined in some cases, for others, performance and attitude significantly improved. Most students reported better attendance and improved relationships with adults and peers. (2) Adults who participated in the training workshops reported subtle but important changes in their attitudes, perceptions, and responses in their personal interaction and reported that relationships with both children and coworkers were improved.

Conclusion

This paper began by asking what must happen to ensure the success of all of our students and explored the importance of adult-youth interactions and relationships in fostering healthy self-development and academic success. Research validated this importance and a case was made that these relationships are more important than in times past because of the complexity of the times and the decrease of parents' availability and family support. The role of teachers and other adults was noted to be increasingly critical. Qualities and characteristics of effective teachers were reviewed as well as some specific adult behaviors that promote positive interactions and relationships with youth.

The *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* and the *Health Realization Model* then were introduced. Their integration with some of the other research findings was proposed as providing a transformed context within which quality adult-youth interactions and relations naturally empower the healthy self-development and academic success of young people. Viewed from the frame provided by this integration, positive adult-youth interactions and relationships actually facilitate the elicitation of a core of mental health within the child. At this core is an inherent sense of well-being and self-esteem; an inherent motivation characterized by curiosity, love of learning, and desire to master the environment; common sense and the capacity to make

mature judgments; an unself-consciousness and natural ability to respond with empathy; and an inner wisdom and connection to insight, creativity, and realizations -- the very "stuff" underlying healthy self-development and academic success. A specific intervention program featuring an "empowerment philosophy" representing the integration of the *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* and the *Health Realization Model* was presented along with results from the intervention for adults and youth.

What is next? First, in the Neighbors Making a Difference Project we found that because of the nature of teaching and its intensity and "ongoingess," it is easy for teachers to fall back into habitual thinking and, at least in the heat of the moment, to "forget" the messages of the empowerment philosophy. As a result, we believe that a support system for teachers be instituted as a follow-on to initial empowerment training workshops and the impact studied. A support system might take the form of weekly or bimonthly sessions during which teachers could share what has been working and not working for them as they applied the empowerment philosophy in the classroom. Just interacting with one another around the philosophy should keep it more "alive" and teachers could learn from the modeling they would provide for one another.

Second, intervening with youth themselves by directly introducing them to the empowerment philosophy and providing them with a quality adult relationship would seem to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of any intervention, particularly given it is often difficult to access the parents and other adults with whom any specific group of young people relate and interact on a consistent basis.

Third, more research needs to focus on how to effectively recruit parents of at-risk

students to participate in parenting sessions that would result in their own and their children's empowerment. Because these parents are often poor, less educated, and preoccupied with dealing with the day-to-day difficulties of making ends meet and taking care of their children, it may be that a one-on-one, at-home model of intervention would prove more effective than group sessions. This hypothesis needs to be tested.

Finally, we need to discover how to better internalize and institutionalize the empowerment philosophy so that it is more readily and consistently accessed by adults and youth "in the thick of it." The philosophy needs to move from something believed by people to becoming "who they are" and "how they are" with respect to themselves and others. How to cause this to happen is a subject for further research.

Goethe said,

> "If we take people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat them as if they were what they ought to be, we help them to become what they are capable of becoming."

I would alter Goethe's statement to read,

> If we take people as they appear to be, they get worse. If we consistently treat them as who they inherently are, they naturally become that.

To go back to the beginning, then, it is our belief that the kinds of relationships and interactions between adults and youth that have always fostered healthy self-development and academic success are equally as valid and even more critical in today's more complex world. The transformed context provided by the *Reciprocal Empowerment Model* and the *Health Realization Model* provides hope and optimism in approaching and dealing with what appear to be overwhelming problems in schools and with youth today because, within this context, quality adult-youth interactions and relationships naturally empower the healthy self-development and

academic success of young people. Given the right environment and the right kinds of relationships, they will be prepared to meet the challenges before them as they enter the 21st century.

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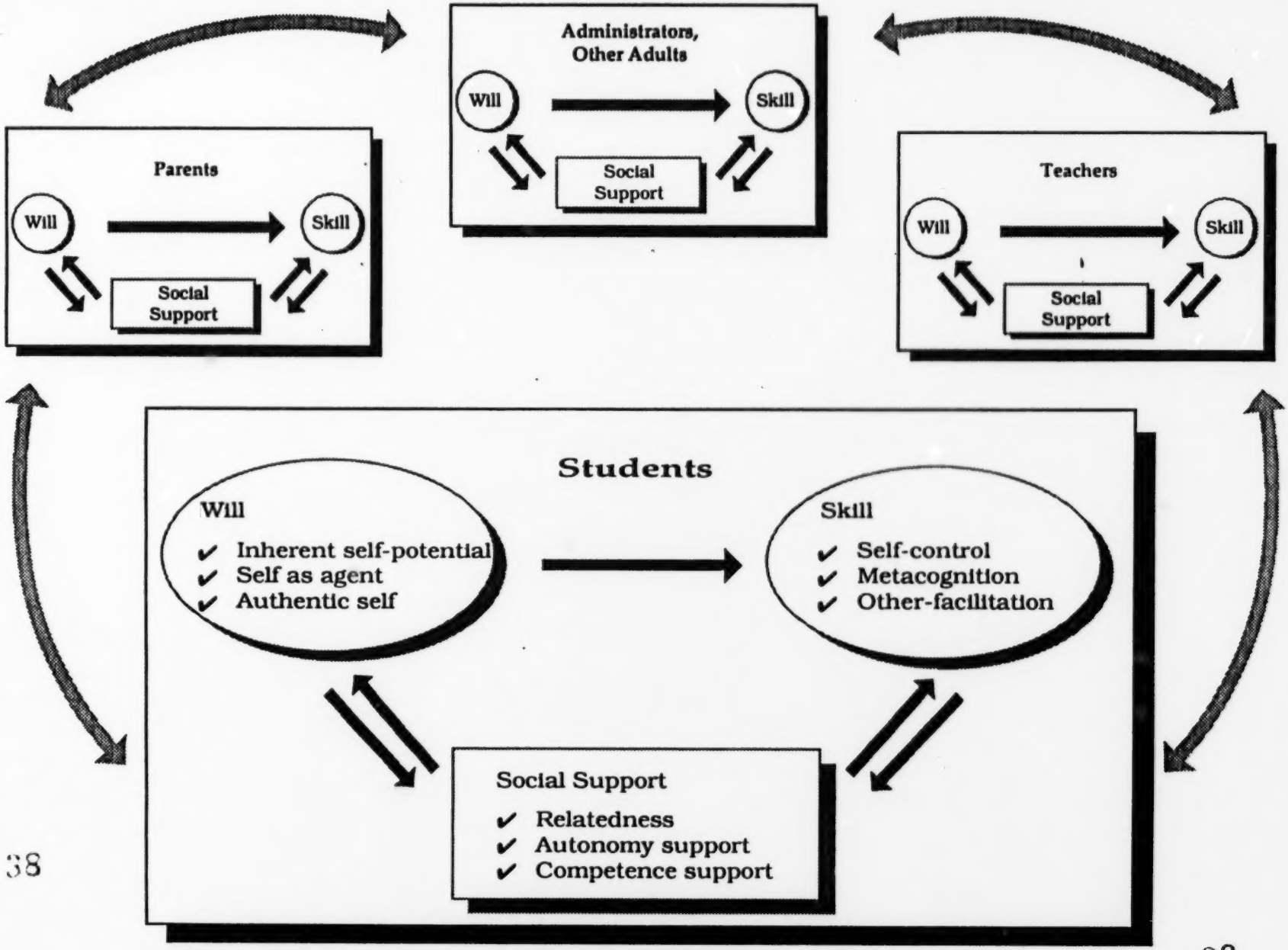

Figure 1. Parameters of a new paradigm of motivation: The reciprocal empowerment model.